

RETAIL RESILIENCY SURVEY: 2026 HOLIDAY EDITION

Trust in Transition

How AI, Consumer Skepticism and Spending Pressures Are Reshaping Holiday Shopping

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Introduction

Americans are heading into the holiday shopping season with a curious contradiction: they're increasingly skeptical of what they see online, yet more willing to let artificial intelligence decide what to buy.

Shoppers are questioning whether product images are real, reviews can be trusted and unfamiliar retailers are legitimate. Yet many are turning to the same technology fueling those doubts to find deals, compare products and even make purchases on their behalf.

And while consumers may be rethinking how they shop, they're not necessarily scaling back their holiday plans. Instead, many are cutting everyday expenses, including groceries and household essentials, to make room for gifts, celebrations and experiences.

These are among the findings of FTI Consulting's Retail Resiliency Survey: 2026 Holiday Edition, developed by FTI Consulting's Retail & Consumer Products team within its Strategic Communications segment. The research was conducted online in October 2026 by the segment's dedicated Corporate Positioning & Insights research team. Building on the inaugural Retail Resiliency Survey released in May 2026, this latest edition examines consumer trust, brand perceptions and the factors influencing purchasing decisions during retail's busiest shopping season, with implications for how brands engage consumers in 2027.

While the holiday season provides the backdrop, the challenges facing retailers are far from seasonal. The findings raise critical questions for 2027: How do you earn trust when shoppers aren't sure what's real? How do you reach customers who increasingly rely on AI to make decisions? And how do you compete when every purchase comes with a trade-off?

> "We surveyed more than 1,000 U.S. consumers ahead of the busiest shopping period of the year and saw a really interesting paradox. People are becoming more skeptical of what they see online, yet more willing to let AI help them decide what to buy. Retailers have spent years building relationships directly with consumers, and now AI is starting to sit between them. As we head into 2027, authenticity may be the glue that holds those relationships together."



Rachel Rosenblatt

Head of the Americas Retail & Consumer Products sector

Strategic Communications, FTI Consulting

Executive Summary

The findings point to three defining challenges for retailers heading into the 2026 holiday shopping season:

1 AUTHENTICITY IS THE NEW COMMODITY.

AI-generated content, questionable reviews and sophisticated scams are making consumers more skeptical of what they see online. At the same time, shoppers are responding positively to human-created content and turning to physical stores for reassurance. As distinguishing what's real becomes harder, authenticity carries growing value.

2 AI IS CHANGING WHO, OR WHAT, INFLUENCES A PURCHASE.

Consumers may distrust AI-generated content, but they're increasingly willing to put AI to work. Nearly three in four trust AI with at least one holiday shopping task, while younger consumers are willing to let it choose retailers and even complete purchases. AI is becoming a new intermediary between brands and their customers.

3 HOLIDAY SPENDING IS BEING PROTECTED AT THE EXPENSE OF EVERYDAY PURCHASES.

Nearly three in four consumers are cutting everyday spending to preserve their holiday budgets. These sacrifices extend beyond discretionary purchases to groceries and household essentials, particularly among Millennials, suggesting holiday spending is increasingly coming at the expense of everyday necessities.



Key Findings

1. AI-generated shopping content is making consumers more cautious about unfamiliar retailers.

- Two-thirds of consumers (66%) say the growing use of AI-generated product images, descriptions and reviews make them more cautious about buying from unfamiliar online retailers, including 36% who are much more cautious.
- More than four in 10 (41%) say their primary reason for visiting a physical store is to either see, touch or try products, or to verify that merchandise matches what's presented online.

WHAT THIS MEANS

As AI makes online product content harder to trust, established retailers have an opportunity to capitalize on their brand recognition and credibility, while unfamiliar brands must work harder to earn consumer confidence. Physical stores can reinforce that trust by allowing shoppers to verify products firsthand. For retailers, the communications priority is to demonstrate authenticity and build trust across channels, ensuring that product claims, in-store experiences and what ultimately arrives at the customer's doorstep consistently align.



66% of consumers say AI-generated content makes them **more cautious** about buying from unfamiliar online retailers.

2. Online reviews are losing their power to reassure shoppers.

- Fewer than one in four consumers (23%) assume most online product reviews are written by real customers.
- More than half (57%) believe reviews are either a mix of authentic and fake or AI-generated content, or mostly fake or AI-generated.

WHAT THIS MEANS

When shoppers question whether reviews are real, retailers lose a valuable source of credibility. Verified customer testimonials, transparent review practices, real customer stories and other signals of authenticity can help brands provide the reassurance that traditional online ratings no longer reliably deliver.



Only 23% of consumers assume most online product reviews are real.

3. Data privacy and AI ethics are becoming significant threats to brand trust.

— Data privacy concerns now rank equally with product safety issues (30% each) among the factors consumers say would most damage their trust in a brand.

— Unethical AI use isn't far behind at 26%, ranking ahead of established reputational concerns, including misleading sustainability claims (17%) and supply chain or sourcing practices (13%).

WHAT THIS MEANS

Consumers are paying closer attention to how responsibly brands handle personal data and use AI. Retailers need to make these practices a more visible part of their communications, explaining how customer information is protected, how AI is used responsibly and what safeguards are in place. Transparency and accountability can help build confidence and protect brand reputation.

4. As brands embrace AI, consumers are rewarding those keeping humans behind their marketing and advertising content.

— Nearly two-thirds of consumers (65%) say they would view a brand more positively if they knew its advertising and marketing content were created without AI.

— When brands label their marketing as "human-made" or "made without AI," consumers most commonly associate it with greater authenticity (41%) and trustworthiness (41%).

— Gen Z is more likely to associate human-created content with higher quality (40%), while older consumers more commonly associate it with ethical business practices (32%).

WHAT THIS MEANS

As AI makes marketing content faster and less expensive to produce, human creativity may become a more valuable point of differentiation. For retailers, the opportunity is to be deliberate about where AI use adds value and where it risks weakening perceptions of authenticity. Brands that can demonstrate the people, craftsmanship and expertise behind their products are better positioned to stand out in an AI-saturated marketplace.

What would most damage your trust in a brand?

DATA PRIVACY
As significant as product safety

UNETHICAL AI USE
Ahead of greenwashing and sourcing concerns



65% view brands **more positively** when their marketing is created without AI.

5. AI is fueling holiday fraud anxiety, putting a premium on trusted retailer communications.

- About seven in 10 consumers say AI has made them more worried about online scams (74%), fake sellers and websites (72%) and counterfeit products (68%) compared with previous holiday seasons.
- The concern extends beyond checkout: 85% of consumers worry about clicking fraudulent links in emails or text messages disguised as shipping notifications.
- When a retailer faces a major disruption, such as a cyber incident, website outage or delivery delays, "communicating openly about the problem and providing regular updates" tops the list of actions consumers say would do the most to keep their trust (29%), ahead of "resolving the problem as quickly as possible" (25%).

WHAT THIS MEANS

AI-related fraud poses a growing reputational challenge for retailers, even when they're not responsible for the scams. Communications teams must make legitimate brand messages easy to recognize and verify, while proactively helping customers identify fraud. When disruptions occur, transparent communication and regular updates are essential to maintaining trust, not simply managing the fallout.



Open communication & regular updates

#1 WAY TO KEEP TRUST DURING:



Cyber incidents



Website outages



Delivery delays

6. Despite growing skepticism about AI-generated content, consumers are increasingly willing to trust AI with shopping decisions.

- Nearly three in four consumers (74%) trust an AI tool to handle at least one holiday shopping task, including finding deals (38%), comparing products (34%) and recommending gifts for loved ones (30%).
- More than one in four young adult shoppers (ages 18-34) trust an AI tool to decide which retailer or website to buy from (26%), select specific gifts (31%) and make purchases on their behalf, with or without final approval (34%).

WHAT THIS MEANS

AI is becoming another voice influencing which brands consumers discover and choose. Retail communications teams need to understand how AI tools describe and recommend their brands, address inaccuracies and make credible, up-to-date information about their products and reputation easy to find.



74% trust AI
with at least one shopping task

7. Holiday spending is coming at the expense of everyday purchases, even essentials.

- Nearly three in four consumers (73%) are cutting back on everyday purchases to afford holiday gifts, celebrations and experiences.
- Among those cutting back, dining out and takeout top the list of spending reductions (58%).
- Among those cutting back, nearly one-third (31%) are reducing spending on groceries or household essentials, rising to 37% among Millennials, who are making some of the toughest trade-offs to preserve their holiday budgets.



73% of consumers are cutting back on everyday purchases to afford the holidays.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Holiday spending is putting pressure on everyday purchases, particularly food. For grocers and restaurants, these pressures coincide with changing eating habits, including the rise of GLP-1 medications. As consumers rethink their spending, retailers need to communicate their value more clearly, whether through affordability, quality, convenience or offerings that reflect changing customer needs.





Implications for Retail & Consumer Products Leaders

The 2026 holiday season is exposing a more complicated relationship between retailers and their customers. Consumers are questioning the credibility of online content while putting more trust in AI shopping tools. They're looking to physical stores for reassurance and experiences they can't get online, and they're making deliberate trade-offs that can shift spending from one category to another.

The findings point to three emerging communications priorities for retailers heading into 2027:

1. GIVE CONSUMERS MORE REASONS TO TRUST YOUR BRAND.

As consumers become more skeptical of digital content and more concerned about data privacy and AI ethics, retailers need to show consumers why they can be trusted. That means backing up claims about product quality, being transparent about AI use and showing how customer information is protected. Trust should be reinforced through what a company says, what it does and how it treats customers.

2. PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT AI IS SAYING ABOUT YOUR BRAND.

AI is changing how consumers discover products and decide where to buy, while also creating new opportunities for fraud and misinformation. Communications teams need to understand how AI tools describe and recommend their brands, identify inaccuracies and ensure credible, up-to-date information is accessible to the platforms influencing purchasing decisions.

3. REINFORCE BRAND VALUE AS CONSUMERS RETHINK SPENDING PRIORITIES.

As shoppers make harder choices about where to spend, communications must give consumers compelling reasons to choose one brand over another, whether that's quality, reliability, service or something competitors can't easily offer. A clear and consistent value proposition can help protect customer loyalty when household budgets are under pressure.

Survey Methodology

The *Retail Resiliency Survey: 2026 Holiday Edition* was developed by FTI Consulting's Retail & Consumer Products team within its Strategic Communications segment, with research conducted online between October 22-27, 2026 by the segment's dedicated Corporate Positioning & Insights research team. The survey was conducted among 1,042 U.S. adults aged 18 and older, with demographic quotas established using U.S. Census benchmarks for age, gender, race/ethnicity and income. The margin of error is ±3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

Meet Our Team & Get in Touch

The Retail & Consumer Products team within FTI Consulting's Strategic Communications segment works with business leaders navigating an environment where brand perception is shaped in real-time and decisions across the organization carry immediate reputational and commercial impact.

We bring a proven track record helping retail and consumer brands manage growth, disruption and high-stakes moments while protecting long-term brand equity.

Our team combines deep sector expertise with an integrated approach across corporate reputation, crisis, financial communications and public affairs. We understand the realities shaping your business, from workforce dynamics to supply chain pressures to the visibility of decisions made in public view. We pair that with strong, established media relationships across financial, trade, consumer and national outlets, ensuring your story is told accurately, consistently and in the right context.

Importantly, we operate as a senior-led, hands-on team from strategy through execution, with a disciplined focus on measuring what matters and tying communications back to business outcomes.

Please contact us at RetailLeadershipTeam@fticonsulting.com with questions and feedback on this report. Our team looks forward to being your partner in tackling the challenges facing your organization.

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